Ecuador Envoy Honored for Human Rights Activism  
Special to the Diplomatic Pouch contributed by Larry Luxner

Ecuador's widely traveled ambassador to the United States — who's served his country in places as diverse as Australia, Bulgaria and El Salvador — was honored Tuesday night for his work in helping disabled people around the globe.

Luís Benigno Gallegos Chiriboga, Quito's man in Washington for more than four years, received a "special recognition for outstanding service to the cause of human rights and handicapped persons." The lavish reception and dinner event — held at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center — was organized by the Greater Washington Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (GWHCC) and attracted a number of fellow ambassadors from Latin American countries.

Also in attendance was Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.), chairman of the House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, as well as Arturo Valenzuela, who on Nov. 10 was sworn in as assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs.

Gallegos told the 85 invited guests that he and his wife Fabiola have for years been deeply committed to the cause of human rights.

"We have seen oppression of human liberties, the persecution of religious beliefs, the violence of war, the activities of death squads and the imposition of terror be it by state and non-state actors, the inequities of underdevelopment and hunger, the lack of education and health, and the enormous scenarios in which life tries the human effort of women, men and children," he declared. "What we learned is that man can extend his hand in friendship or his fist in hate. That he can learn to kill, rape and destroy, and that it is harder for one to fight for values and defend a cause."

Gallegos, 63, said that throughout his life, he’s focused on three areas of concern with regard to human rights: women, children and the disabled.

"Our societies oppress the indigenous and the disabled with an attitude of moral superiority that is terrible," said the ambassador, noting that he had the "extraordinary opportunity" of chairing the U.N. General Assembly committee that negotiated the Convention on Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

"There are 650 million people with visible and non-visible disabilities," he said. "You are born with a disability, you acquire it during your life by accident, sickness, war, underdevelopment and whatever other cause, but when you are old you will become disabled. The convention will permit these billions of persons to have enforceable rights, and I applaud President Obama's decision to sign and ratify this convention."

In addition to his native Spanish, Gallegos is fluent in French and speaks English with a Brooklyn accent (thanks to his early attendance at New York City high schools during the 1950s when his father was Ecuador's ambassador to the United Nations). He said one of his most moving experiences was a 2003 visit to wartorn eastern Congo.

"There, I met the victims of a conflict that targets civilian populations, but more than that I met and cried and sang with women who were raped as a weapon of war," he recalled. "It was a life-changing experience. To break the backbone of society, the enemy targets women. I saw and met child soldiers and I put a face on an issue which many would prefer to forget."

Gallegos is now a member of the U.N. Committee Against Torture, Inhuman, Cruel and Degrading Treatments and Punishments, and is one of 10 experts that monitor individual countries' compliance with the convention.

Another issue close to the ambassador’s heart is that of human rights and transnational corporations.

"I wrote my doctoral thesis on rights and transnational corporations, but never in my wildest dreams did I think that I would be fighting for the existence of my people against such powerful organizations," he said. "I belong to a leadership group with Kofi Annan, Mary Robinson and 10 others that tries to foster the doctrine of protect, respect and remedy that would permit business to work under human rights guidelines in the world."

It so happens that Ecuador is the focus of one of the planet’s biggest legal battles between big business and
environmentalists. Petroleum giant Chevron Corp. faces a $27 billion lawsuit stemming from ecological damage at oilfields once operated by Texaco — which Chevron acquired in 2001 — in remote areas of Ecuador’s Amazon rainforest.

In accepting the GWHCC award, Gallegos praised his wife Fabiola as his spiritual companion.

“She is the one who picks up the pieces and gives me the strength to continue in a quest that I hope will end when we close our eyes for the last time,” he said. “For we deeply believe that the dignity of the human essence is a cause that we must pursue as a moral and ethical obligation.”

Top photo from left, Arturo Valenzuela, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs; Angela Franco, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Washington Hispanic Chamber of Commerce; Ambassador Luis Gallegos and his wife Fabiola de Gallegos attend an awards ceremony at the Washington Convention Center that honored the ambassador for his human rights advocacy.

Bottom photo from left, Fabiola de Gallegos; Ambassador of Ecuador Luis Gallegos; Mercedes Lemp, executive director of the Mayor’s Office of Latino Affairs; and dinner chairwoman Jane Lee Garcia attend the Greater Washington Hispanic Chamber of Commerce’s awards dinner for Ambassador